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ABSTRACT

In defining an audience, writers make guesses about the mutual knowledge shared between writer and readers, and thus send cues to readers that exclude them from the audience for a specific discourse. Often writers assume that readers possess more knowledge than they actually do, and so make it impossible for readers to function within the world of the discourse. This phenomenon is most obvious in government and legal documents, and can border on the criminal, because needy people are denied full access to government services and to the courts because of a lack of understanding of the discourse. Yet it is not only disadvantaged or poorly-educated readers who are excluded from writings. Text inaccessibility seems to be part of a wider trend, affecting all sectors of our society, including the scholarly and professional communities. As a consequence of incomprehensible texts, more and more decision-making is relegated to experts. Teachers of writing must make students aware that there are many potential audiences for almost any piece of writing, and the way in which they exploit mutual knowledge will determine which readers will be brought into their texts and which readers will be excluded. One suggested way to do this is to have students write the "same essay" for more than one audience. (ARH)

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DEFINING AUDIENCE NEGATIVELY: ONE WAY THAT WRITERS KEEP READERS FROM THEIR TEXTS

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Abstract of "Defining Audience Negatively"

There has been much controversy about the relationship between writers and their audiences. But even though scholars can't seem to agree about what the audience is--real or the creation of the writer--they seem to agree that once writers define (or create) their audiences, they "aim" their discourses at specific audiences. In other words, they create a bond between themselves and the people they want to read their writing. The emphasis here seems to be a positive one, including writer and readers in a community with shared experiences and values. But writers define their audiences in a very different way: they send cues to readers that exclude them from the audience for a specific discourse (the opening paragraphs of a scholarly article are a good example of this kind of exclusion). This presentation focused on one kind of cue writers send to exclude certain readers from their audience and some of the implications of this phenomenon for readers who are "left out" of discourses. The final paragraph suggests one strategy teachers can use to help students become more conscious of how they exclude readers from their texts.

CS211-17

Defining Audience Negatively:

One Way That Writers Keep Readers From Their Texts

Even a cursory review of the articles written about audience in the past fifteen to twenty years reveals deep disagreements between scholars about the meaning of the term "audience." Review articles like Kroll's "Writing for Readers: Three Perspectives on Audience" (CCC, May 1984) and Ede and Lunsford's "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy (CCC, May 1984) show the range of approaches scholars have taken to the concept of audience. Peter Elbow provides a summary of some, but by no means all, of the ways to think about audience. He says:

> There are many different entities called audience: a) the actual readers to whom the text will be given: b) the writer's conception of those readers...; c) the audience that the text implies...; d) the discourse community or even genre addressed or implied by the text...; e) ghost or even phantom "readers in the head" that the writer may unconsciously address or try to please... (College English, Jan. 1987, 50).

But no matter how different various definitions of audience may be, contemporary scholars seem to agree on one point: that no matter who/what the audience is (from real people to a fictional construct) writers adjust their discourses to their audiences. In other words, writers do things to bring their readers into their texts, to establish a community that includes themselves and their readers.

Almost every rhetoric text contains a more or less useful heuristic for helping writers identify their audiences, so that they can make their discourses relevant and attractive to them. But all the advice about accommodating discourse to an audience ignores an obvious fact: that any choice we make for something necessarily implies a choice against something else. So, for example, your decision to attend this session of the conference means that you have simultaneously chosen not to attend the other sessions that are offered at this time--for better or for worse. This principle certainly applies to our discussion of audience as well. If I shape my discourse to accommodate one audience, I am, at the same time, excluding--"distancing" might be a better term--other possible audiences from my text. I would like us ot think about the implications of this for our writing and teaching by considering 1) one sort of textual cue that excludes certain readers from certain texts and 2) implications of this phenomenon for readers who are excluded from the audience for a particular text.

Writers exclude readers from their texts by the way they exploit mutual knowledge. According to Gordon Thomas, "mutual knowledge" is "the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs that a...

writer and the audience knowingly have in common" ("Mutual Knowledge: A Theoretical Basis for Analyzing Audiences." CE, Oct. 1986, p. 582) I would like to alter Thomas' definition slightly and suggest that writers must make guesses about how much knowledge of the world they share with their audiences and exploit those guesses as they create their discourses. Notice that in scholarly articles, for example, writers assume that they and their readers share a great deal of knowledge. This is a safe and useful assumption for the most part. Scholars writing for others scholars freely exploit the jargon of their disciplines and make cryptic allusions to significant works in their fields, a useful shorthand that, among other things, clearly indicates that both writers and readers are members of a specific discourse community. But while this semi-secret code brings initiated readers into the discourse, it simultaneously excludes non-initiated readers from the text--no matter how interested in the topic and intelligent they may be. Notice, for example, how much knowledge Walter Ong assumes his readers will share with him.

> The standard locus in Western intellectual tradition for study of audience responses has been rhetoric. But rhetoric originally concerned oral communication, as is indicated by its name, which comes from the Greek word for public speaking. Over two millennia, rhetoric has been gradually extended to include writing more and more, until today, in highly technological cultures, this is its principal concern. But the extension has come gradually and has advanced "pare passu" with the slow and largely unnoticed emergence of markedly chirographic and typographic styles out of those originating in oral performance, with the result that the differentiation between speech and writing has never become a matter of urgent concern for the rhetoric of any age: when orality was in the ascendancy, rhetoric was oral-focused; as orality yielded to writing, the focus of rhetoric was slowly shifted, unreflectively for the most part, and without notice..."("The Writer's Audience Is Always A Fiction", PMLA, 1975, 2&3).

This kind of exclusion does not only happen among scholars working in their fields of expertise. We can see this same kind of phenomenon taking place in any "special" community; athletes, auto mechanics, teenagers (just to mention a few examples) all use specialized languages that rely on mutual knowledge, which includes some people in, and excludes others from, their discourse communities.

But there is obviously another side to the way mutual knowledge is exploited by writers. Authors can assume that they and their audiences share little knowledge about the topic of the discourse (The risk we run when we deliver papers at conferences like this). Because of this assumption, they will tell expert readers much that they already know and, consequently, those readers will be distanced from the text. A goood example of this kind of distancing would be the way one scholar reads another

scholar's introductory textbook. Obviously the scholar is not included in the text the way novice readers would be. The scholar relates to the text as an evaluator rather than as a seeker of information or insight.

Having briefly examined one way in which authors exclude readers from their texts, we turn our attention to the implications of this exclusion for readers.

In certain cases, and perhaps this is more pervasive than we care to admit, writers' assumptions about how much knowledge they share with their audiences can make it completely impossible for some readers to function within the world of the discourse. This phenomenon is most obvious in government and legal documents, where bureaucrats and lawyers are thoroughly initiated into a particular discourse community. When these writers follow the conventions of written discourse for their professions, they create documents that are relatively easy for other members of their community to read; but at the same time, these conventions and their underlying assumptions about mutual knowledge make the same documents nearly impossible for uninitiated readers to understand. It is important to notice that these documents may be well-written (although often this is not the case). The problem is not necessarily the style of the discourse--it is the unexamined assumptions about how fully initiated into the particular discourse community the readers of the text are. Melissa Holland's research for the Document Design Project illustrates just how inaccessible many documents designed to help needy people get government assistance really are. For example, she shows that, in one case, medicaid forms were filled out incorrectly because the writers of the document and the persons filling them out didn't share the same definition of relatively simple words like "family." ("Psycholinguistic Alternatives to Readability Formulas," Document Design Project. May, 1981, pp. 17ff).

This kind of exclusion can border on the criminal, because needy people are denied full access to government services and to the courts. But it is not only disadvantaged or poorly-educated readers who are excluded from texts. In the February issue of CCC, Charles Schuster reviewed Martin Nystrand's The Structure of Written Communication: Studies in Reciprocity Between Writers and Readers. In the course of the review, Schuster says this:

> So when I hit a sentence (as I often do) like "Two raters analyzed all subjects' questions into these two categories, and interrater reliability, computed as a Pearson product-moment correlation was $r = .575$; $F = 83.1$; $p < .00001$" I am, to say the least, stunned....It positions the text outside my ability--not to understand (because Nystrand et al do help me understand the general significance of their studies)--but to disagree, to debate, to enter into the text dialogically at crucial points in the argument (89).

What I think Schuster is bringing to light here is that, whether intentionally or not, Nystrand has made his text inaccessible to

those members of our profession (like me) that Stephen North calls "practitioners," those of us who are not initiated into any particular research community (see The Making of Knowledge in Composition). Notice that these kinds of readers must rely on the good faith of authors like Nystrand. If we choose to incorporate some of Nystrand's insights into our teaching, our choice is not as well-informed as it should be. Because we don't understand statistics and empirical research design, we find ourselves relying on expert testimony--even within our own professional community.

This is, it seems to me, part of a larger trend in our society. As our society becomes more complex, it becomes easier and easier for us to give over our decision-making to experts. Our decisions in this case are not about the goodness or badness, rightness or wrongness of a course of action; instead, we must decide which expert to believe. I, for one, do not see this as a very positive trend, and I think that much of the writing that goes on within professional communities--even much of their writing that is supposedly directed to more general audiences--contributes to this tendency to "disenfranchise" ourselves.

I think that most times, experts exclude non-expert readers from their texts unintentionally. I don't believe that members of particular discourse communities conspire to keep uninitiated readers from their texts. I think that they simply follow the path of least resistance in their writing; they write as they have learned to write--and most of them have not given too much thought to the idea of audience.

Consequently, we teachers of writing must make our students see that there are many potential audiences for almost any piece of writing, and that the choices they make as they write--especially the way in which they exploit mutual knowledge--will bring one kind of reader into their text and distance others (see Walzer's "Articles from the California Divorce Project" CCC, May 1985, as an example). One good way to do that is to have students write the "same essay" for more than one real audience, so that they can begin to see how the way they shape their discourse in private creates different kinds of responses in different public audiences. In that context, then, we can begin to help our students decide which possible audiences can be reasonably excluded from the particular text they are working on at the moment. And that decision to include one type of reader and exclude others will then be a conscious one--not simply the unintentional consequence of following whatever conventions for written discourse they acquire as members of particular discourse communities.

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